

Resisting the Evil: (Post-)Yugoslav Anti-War Contention¹, Bojan Bilić and Vesna Janković (eds.)

Those of us who are interested in the analysis of anti-war movements in ex-Yugoslavia and in the post-Yugoslav states have waited a long time for a book as good as this. It is even more of a cause for celebration because it comes together with two other books, *Neispričana povijest ARK 1991-2011* and *We Were Gasping for Air: (Post-)Yugoslav Anti-war Activism and its Legacy*. Indeed, all three coming at once remind me of black Marxist historian C. L. R. James' famous comment on the new wave of black feminist literature in the United States: „One is an accident; two is a coincidence; but three is a movement“. The Croatian language book is a multi-voiced remembering and re-telling of the story of ARK, the Anti-War Campaign, Croatia, and ends with a fascinating academic text by young sociologist Bojan Bilić. The second volume is a revised version of Bilić's doctoral thesis which is an extra ordinarily well written and comprehensive historical sociology of anti-war contention in, primarily, Croatia and Serbia. As well as tracing anti-war movements to their precursors amongst student activisms in 1968 and after, an emerging Yugoslav feminist movement in the 1970s, and nascent 1980s environmentalist and peace activism, primarily in Slovenia, Bilić's book breaks with so much of the existing literature on the wars, in at least five different, and interlinked, ways. Firstly, he concentrates not only on political elites but, also on popular, grassroots and marginalised movements often written out of historical texts. Secondly, he challenges methodological nationalism, replacing a single country focus with a more pan-Yugoslav approach and, in examining Croatia and Serbia, he opens a lens on one of the key axes of anti-war activism in the period. Thirdly, he avoids seeing the concept of civil society, usually reduced to newly composed non-governmental organisations, as a kind of magical panacea for democratic deficits, instead seeing donors' drive to create NGOs as, often part of the problem, rather than its solution. Fourthly, he resists the all too familiar tendency to take ethno-national identifications as natural, prior, and all powerful, preferring instead to explore the constructions of hegemonic nationalist narratives by powerful elites and their unravelling

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and contestation in alternative movements. Finally, and not the least important, unlike texts which ignore gender relations completely and the rather fewer which have a sole, or primary, focus on gender, he situates gender in the context of broader social relations and explores women's organising in the context of re-patriarchalising tendencies.

Resisting the Evil is perhaps the best of the three books, precisely because of its 'in-between' status as neither academic thesis nor faithful chronicler of a single movement. Instead, thirteen chapters by a total of fourteen authors, offer diverse perspectives on aspects of anti-war contention much of which has previously been virtually ignored by the mainstream literature. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, offering a remarkable, multi-layered exploration of interlinked activisms and their relationships to politics, culture and society in the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav context. The strengths of the book can be grouped into four broad areas.

The first is the fact that the book covers every former Yugoslav republic/post-Yugoslav state including Kosovo. The texts demonstrate perhaps more clearly than ever before the fact that there was an alternative to nationalism and war, through an exploration of the diverse but rich array of movements opposing authoritarian nationalism. Whilst there is no chapter specifically referring to Macedonia alone, Ljubica Spaskovska's study of *UJDI (Udruženje za Jugoslavensku demokratsku inicijativu)* is primarily through a Macedonian lens, combined with a focus on *Yutel* through a mainly Bosnian lens. Discussions of *UJDI* show clearly the limitations of a largely idealist notion of inscribing pluralist democracy onto existing Yugoslav society, without any discussion of issues of economic and social change. The book has two full chapters on Bosnia-Herzegovina by Larisa Kurtović and Nebojša Šavija-Valha although both are rather Sarajevo-focused. The chapter on Kosovo by Gezim Krasniqi questions orthodox accounts which suggest that Rugova's LDK was the sole source of resistance to Serbian hegemony before the growth of the KLA. Srđa Pavlović and Milica Dragojević show how the ruling elite in Montenegro have attempted to obliterate their own role in the wars and to marginalise, if not deny, a different history of anti-war activism. Marko Hren's firsthand account of the Slovenian peace and social movements in the 1980s show how there were many attempts to mobilise international support for a non-nationalist Yugoslavia.

Secondly, the conscious choice of the editors to 'privilege the local', producing a book all of whose authors are from the territory of (former-)Yugoslavia works as an 'authentic decolonising effort ... intimately bound with local engagement and local knowledge production» (Bilić and Janković, page 27), without ever appearing essentialist. The book becomes a kind of 'temporary autonomous zone' freed from a Western gaze and formulation. Many of the texts escape the confines of supposedly 'objectivist' academic styles and are infused with activist experiences, sensibilities and standpoints. International actors are not ignored, but are not given primacy. Vesna Janković's text on international volunteers explores transnational solidarity and argues, persuasively, that the mobilisation of volunteers and their incorporation into local anti-war movements constituted a form of 'rooted cosmopolitanism' prefiguring very different 'local-international' alliances. Nebojša Šaviha-Valha's account of peace building in Bosnia and Herzegovina traces the other side of the coin, namely, the ignorant ideas and ill-conceived practices of many external 'peace engineers'. Lepa Mladenović's reflections on lesbian solidarity during the wars speaks to a profound need to explore the intersectionality of oppression.

Thirdly, the book lives with its contradictions and, indeed, celebrates the diversity of styles, voices, theories and methods being used. Some of the chapters are outstandingly good. The editors' auto-ethnographic introduction tells us much about the way the book was compiled and how the editors came to develop a sense of a different kind of book from one originally imagined. Biljana Kasić's text combines feminist and post-colonial theory with a deep reflection on the personal, cultural and political meanings of resistance in war-time. Zala Volčič and Mojca Planšak's exploration of alternative radio stations in Macedonia, Slovenia and Serbia, as well as Bojan Bilić's exploration of *Arkzin* and *Republika*, emphasise the importance of the cultural dimension of anti-war contention. Kurtović discusses the Sarajevo scene including *Radio Zid*, the underground music scene and the creative artists *Grupa Trio*, suggesting that, in such extreme conditions, seeing such initiatives through the tropes of 'NGOs', 'social movements' or, even, 'anti-war activism' is far too limited. Her discussion of the traumas of peace and the limitations of self-definitions as 'urban', 'cosmopolitan' and 'European' have a wider resonance in the post-Yugoslav space, of course. Bojan Aleksov's text on conscientious objection, arguably the best in the book, reminds me of Audre Lorde's statement that «every line I write shrieks there are no easy solutions» (Lorde, 1984:78). It is clear that the author is on unfamiliar territory, writing a profoundly autobiographical,

reflexive, and emotional text which, in its moving between levels of abstraction and, above all, in refusing to reproduce politically correct interpretations, captures brilliantly both the empowering nature of activist engagement and the limits to dialogue in conflict.

Linked to this, the fourth key element is the move from judging activism as 'effective' or not, to a focus on the 'affective' dimensions of anti-war contention. Here, activism becomes part of what Judith Butler has termed «a sustaining web of relations» which, indeed, «makes our lives possible» (Butler, 2000: 24). The book shows the impossibility of maintaining a clear divide between 'the public' and 'the private' when life itself is at stake, without forgetting the deep intimacies and antagonisms which are produced and reproduced in such emotionally-charged environments.

The book has set a marker for more research on and by activists in the post-Yugoslav space, building on the many collaborations, some obvious, others less so (such as the use in Kurtović's text of interview material gathered by Bilić). Future work may link this moment with the study of later waves of activism. If there is one reservation about the book it is the relative failure to connect the study of this anti-war activism with a small, but important, literature on the ethnography of everyday life in war-time and the more mundane or less fully articulated resistances which can be found in a number of sites, including football stadia, in the period. As a result, the tendency is to see the anti-war activism of the period as somehow disconnected from, and even superior to, wider resistances, recalcitrances and survival strategies. The danger in this is that the book may contribute to an impression that 'the (nationalist, authoritarian) other', presented as 'the evil' in the title, was more homogeneous and, perhaps, even, more powerful than was actually the case.

References

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